

Aspirations Mapping and Photography

Enhancing visual and photography skills for reflexivity and creative expression

Rationale

One of the underlying premises of the Connect2Aspire study is that a deep exploration and understanding of young people's aspirations and their interrelatedness with communication practices and outer opportunity requires innovative, creative techniques for youth engagement and research data collection. Aspirations are complex states, and their development is enduring and non-linear. Creative engagement approaches such as participatory photography offer the potential for deeper engagement and reflexivity, by offering participants other means for expression and communication, beyond the propositional (word-based) ones. In Connect2Aspire, this potential was investigated by means of creative research workshops that included a short course for imparting basic visual literacy and photography skills. The aim was to test this potential as well as map the conditions by which deep engagement, reflexivity, sharing and exchange are facilitated. This reflective brief reports on the first participatory photography workshop conducted in Coventry, UK and discusses key ingredients of the approach taken for further generating reflexivity and engagement in participants.

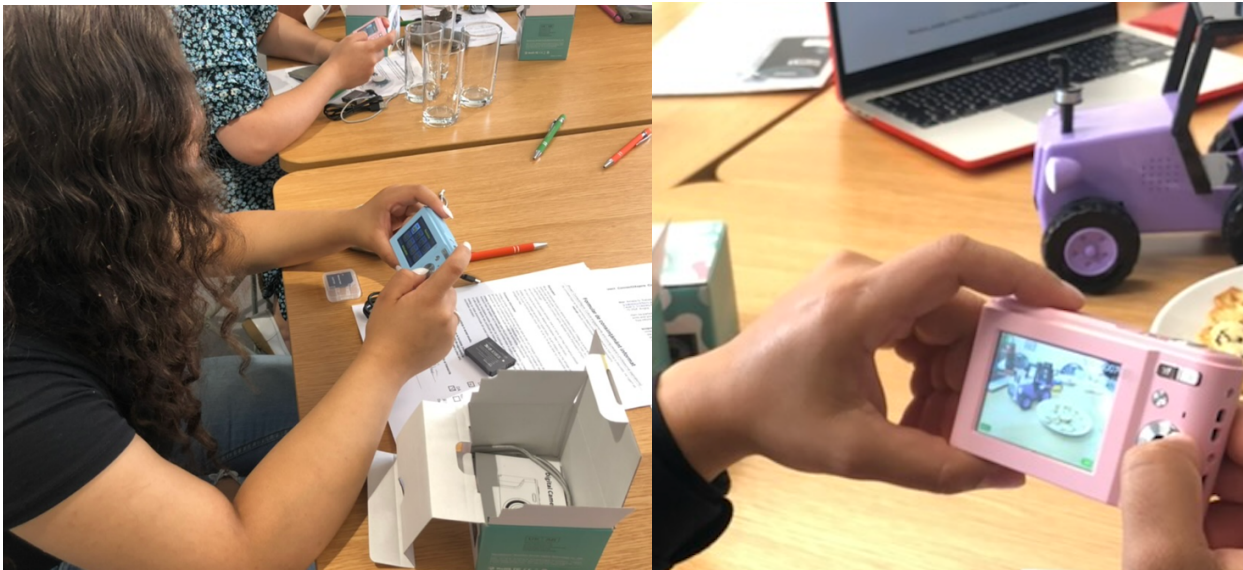
Context and participants

A workshop with young people at moments of transition was organised in Autumn 2022 in Coventry, UK. This was the first of a two-step experience offered to young people as a safe space to reflect on their life and career aspirations, in an atmosphere marked by creative expression, sharing and exchanges with peers and facilitators. This first workshop was focused on enhancing young people's visual and photography skills and apply them to reflect on the existence (or absence) of a strong professional aspiration and its importance. A call to participate in the workshop was launched through a community centre and addressed young people between 18 and 30 years old, all members of the local Roma community. Four young people participated, three young women and one young man with ages ranging between 18 and 30 years old.

Activities

The workshop was run with the help of a professional photographer and facilitator, who was involved in designing the experience so that it responded to the two core aims of the workshop: 1) enhance visual literacy and photography skills; in conjunction with 2) applying these skills to gain a nuanced understanding of their own aspirations and goals. The photography course was led by the professional photographer and included a session in a community centre followed by photography practice in a nearby park. A researcher with experience in community-based and participatory

research acted as facilitator and complemented the photographer throughout the workshop delivery. The teaching approach carefully blended notions about photography techniques with short, applied exercises.



In the first part of the workshop, participants were provided with Sevenat digital cameras and taught basic photography techniques, which included: composition rules and guides, using angles in photography, patterns, lighting, and different styles of photography (portrait, street photography, lifestyle). One of the most important sessions included techniques for communicating emotions through photography. Participants first deciphered emotions in photographs discussed in group, then applied themselves to pick an emotional state and portray it in a photograph setting of their choice. In the second part of the workshop, participants had to apply everything they learnt about composition, lighting, types of photography, and emotion into their own photos. They were asked to use the location (a nearby park) to tell a story about the lifestyle they aspire to, making use of angles, looking for lines, patterns and evoking an emotion/ feeling.

Reflections and Lessons learned

The analysis of the workshop and its outcomes suggests that participatory photography can be immensely valuable for enhancing reflection on internal states, life events and the way these connect with future-looking life and career aspirations. At the same time, the overall approach and the selection of the techniques employed are critically important. Imparting photography skills is not only a means to an end, but a process by which participants also give new angles to their experiences and goals; or by which they may help surface states, wishes and long-forgotten experiences by the power of association. For example, the photography crash course gave step by step illustrations, tips and ideas on using light, angles, patterns for evidencing certain aspects of the portrayed objects and people and evidencing certain qualities: such as the strength associated with photographing a subject from below so that they loom high and powerful; and the way someone is minimised, made insignificant if being pictured from the top down. Or how the skilful use of light and darkness can evoke ideas of hidden or concealed.

A related observation is that it is important to weave photography skills exercises with elements of aspirations mapping. This ran contrary to the initial design of the workshop, in which the plan was to separate the photography training from the actual exercise of aspirations mapping. However, the experience of this first workshop indicated that aspirations mapping would ideally be fused through the applied camera exercises. For example, the applied exercise in which young people had to decipher and then design their own setting for evoking a powerful emotion was one of the most engaging for participants. As illustrated by the first highlight story, participants had to think about the best way of portraying an emotionally charged event or situation in their lives related to their aspirations - either achievements or associated challenges, and then they had to enact it. This compelled an examination of inner states and emotions associated with their aspirations and led to very creative set-ups (see *Highlight Story 1*).

Highlight story | 1

18 year old Carina was the elderly of many siblings. Her family relied on her to help with childcare for her younger brothers and sisters. They wanted to ensure the best for her in life, and secure her path to a viable profession and a financially stable lifestyle. At the same time, they were highly protective of her and Carina felt their protective attitude as a straightening jacket. Her future dreams were all crystallised around her aim to become independent and make her own decisions. When asked to use the camera and angles to portray the challenges to achieving her dream profession, she developed a scene where a half full glass of water was leaning dangerously on the very edge of the table. She photographed this glass on the edge as a symbol of the double-edged challenge she encounters: On the one hand her parents' helping hands keep the glass from falling. On the other hand she would like to take the risks herself, and find her own means of getting back to security.

The activities in the park gave further nuance to her reflection on her dreams and challenges associated with achieving them. When asked to portray her dream profession, or lifestyle, she realised that what she wished for was actually a well-compensated, secure job. There was no tension at all between her own dreams and those that her parents wished for her. What she really wanted was rather, for her to be able to make her own decisions.

The other insight offered by the workshop is that group exchanges as well as one on one focused conversations are important elements when seeking to generate reflexivity in participants. It is particularly important for each participant's experience in the workshop to be followed closely at key moments with active questioning, helping them to render in visual format sometimes highly complex ideas, wishes or challenges. The group talk, on the other hand, serves to expand on potential associations and generate a joint, agreed meaning of the task at hand and the limits of possible options to explore. As illustrated in Highlight Story 2, the exercise with the camera in the final stage was used to shed light on highly complex decision points and experiences associated with pursuing a certain professional goal. Exchanges in group preceding the camera exercise, as well as the one-on-one conversations focusing on a story to tell through photography were useful as catalysts in this process.

Highlight story | 2

In the final part of the workshop, young people were asked to think about and create a visual story about the life they aspired to. Through discussions that started at the community centre and continued as we walked to the park, we explored the notion of desired 'lifestyle', and the way one could relate to a targeted profession or job: seeing the job as an end in itself and looking at the inner rewards it offered for example by bringing a sense of achievement and fulfilment for the outcomes of one's work – as a teacher, an artist, or a humanitarian worker would feel accomplished by the results of their activities. Or, rather focusing on external rewards, such as the time or the money a job can offer, even if in itself is not a satisfying or fulfilling activity to perform.

In the park, the photographer-facilitator and the researcher complemented each other in guiding participants, aiming as much as possible to give dedicated time and attention to the story of each of them. One of the girls, 18, was undecided between two somewhat opposite professional goals she was considering: the first involved adrenaline and risk taking, for instance as in being a policewoman. The second option involved a safe, routine job, which left plenty of time for leisure and travelling, and also offered financial security. The discussions with the researcher, guided by active questioning, revealed that what she was actually seeking was the sense of dedicated, keen attention that comes with being under pressure, or in having to meet a very close deadline. Upon close scrutiny, she came to the conclusion that the life of a policewoman was only in exceptional circumstances meeting the standard of an adrenaline-filled role: most of the time it would be rather filled with routine repetitive jobs.



The young girl took representative pictures in two settings: in one of them, she was hanging in the air, with her hands clasped tight around a rope, in a precarious and unstable, potentially unsafe position. In the second, she pictured herself against a wall featuring a graffiti of young people playing team sports, as she was taking one first step. (The picture above was taken by the participant and features the background wall – selected for use in this brief to avoid participant identification).